

VZCZCXR05131

PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR

DE RUEHPS #0780/01 2590957

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 160957Z SEP 06

FM USOFFICE PRISTINA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6506

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0841

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000780

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DEPT FOR DRL, INL, AND EUR/SCE, NSC FOR BRAUN, USUN FOR  
DREW SCHUFLETOWSKI, USOSCE FOR STEVE STEGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/07/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM UNMIK YI

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: ORDINARY SERBS IN KOSOVO'S NORTH SAY THEY  
WANT TO STAY, BUT ARE UNCERTAIN, UNINFORMED

REF: PRISTINA 688

Classified By: COM TINA S. KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Kosovo's Serbs face an existential question: stay on in post-status Kosovo or start over somewhere else. USOP officers traveled recently to Zvecan in northern Kosovo to try to gauge the views of ordinary Serbs. Most of our interlocutors predicted that Serbs would flee en masse if independence were the final status outcome, but -- to a person -- said they themselves would remain. They also downplayed the likelihood of a violent response by Serbs. Most also had no idea what effect on-going decentralization talks would have on their everyday lives, speaking only in vague generalizations about things getting worse with independence. They said they were focused on jobs and economic development. Few have any contact with Kosovo Albanians. While it is difficult to draw conclusions from this limited sample, educating Kosovo Serbs on the benefits of decentralization could help reduce the hold of local hardliners and the impact of Belgrade's policies. END SUMMARY.

All Serbs Will Leave, But I'll Stay...

¶2. (C) During a series of meetings in the northern Serb-majority municipality of Zvecan on September 6, several Kosovo Serbs from the north -- community activists, student leaders, a doctor, a businessman, and a professional basketball coach -- told us about their plans and expectations for Kosovo after status. They all expressed a desire to stay in Kosovo, although most were unsure of what independence would mean in practice. Some, such as Mitrovica Youth Initiative leaders Vladan Vlaskovic and Dragan Milicevic, spoke of violent ethnic cleansing directed against Serbs by Kosovo Albanians if Kosovo becomes independent. Chairman of the Steering Board of the Student Alliance of Mitrovica University Bojan Vasic felt that most Kosovo Serbs would flee if independence were announced, but made clear that he himself would stay, as did the other students who attended the meeting. No one mentioned the likelihood of armed action by Kosovo Serbs in response to independence.

Uninformed About Decentralization Talks

13. (C) Other than civil engineer and successful businessman Andrija Mijanovic, who followed the on-going talks on decentralization, the Serbs we spoke to seemed uninformed about the status negotiations. They had almost no idea what effect decentralization would have on their lives. Mitrovica University architecture student Masa Stojisavljevic said she expected life after independence to be "much worse" than her current existence under international administration, but gave only vague generalizations as to why. When pressed on the point, she and nearly all the others acknowledged that on a practical level not much would change in their everyday lives, even as some continued to predict dire consequences.

#### Primary Concerns Are Economic

14. (C) Our interlocutors' primary concerns were not focused on final status, but on economic problems. Most complained about the lack of employment and development in the region. Several mentioned the importance of the nearby Trepca mining complex as the economic driving force behind the entire region in the past, but none expressed much hope the decrepit facilities will be revitalized soon. The student leaders told us they would move to Serbia if that is the only place they can find jobs, but noted the difficulty of finding work there as well. Community activist Vlaskovic and others mentioned that self-appointed Serb leaders in the north oppose a status resolution mainly because they benefit financially from the unregulated status quo in which they control large amounts of funding from Belgrade with essentially no oversight.

15. (C) Businessman Mijanovic told us that because of

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uncertainty about the future, most Kosovo Serbs are unwilling to invest and the vast majority of their businesses remain very small (with one to four employees). He asserted that 80 percent of people in the north receive inflated public-sector salaries from Belgrade, and said hardline leaders Marko Jaksic and Milan Ivanovic (both E.O.-listed) use their power over these funds to manipulate the population.

#### Stark Lack of Contact with Kosovo Albanians

16. (C) The lack of everyday contacts between these Serbs in the north and Kosovo Albanians in the south was striking. Mijanovic noted that the vast majority of Serbs in the north have not "crossed the bridge" since 1999. Student leader Vasic told us he has no formal or informal contacts with Kosovo Albanian student leaders in Pristina, apart from his participation last year in a joint event sponsored by a Swedish NGO that took place in Upsala, Sweden. Kosovo Serb students were afraid to travel to Pristina for a follow up meeting and Kosovo Albanian students refused to travel to northern Mitrovica, he asserted. Stojisavljevic recounted how some Albanian students cursed her and mocked her concerns about freedom of movement when she participated recently in a BBC-sponsored event in Pristina.

17. (C) OB/GYN doctor at the northern Mitrovica hospital and former Kosovo MP Momcilo Savic told us that Kosovo Serbs from throughout Kosovo come to his hospital for treatment, while Kosovo Albanians just across the bridge in south Mitrovica go to Pristina or elsewhere for care. He denied that Albanians would be turned away or threatened if they came for treatment, saying that they simply fear travel to the north. Savic claimed that the only way to move forward was with full segregation of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians: "we do not touch them, they do not touch us."

#### Heavy Hand of Belgrade

18. (C) Those Serbs who do reach out have been blacklisted or threatened by their ethnic compatriots. Miomir Dasic, VP of the Kosovo Basketball Federation and coach of the Mitrovica

men's professional basketball club "Bambi," said he and his family have received multiple death threats because his team will participate for the first time this year as the only Serb team in the Kosovo men's Super League. He said that when he tried to set up a multi-ethnic children's team, parents would not let their kids participate because they were threatened with losing their jobs. Mijanovic told us that his business (which has 28 full time employees and up to 120 contractors) exclusively works on international contracts, because Jaksic and Ivanovic have blacklisted him for local work.

Comment

¶9. (C) All of Kosovo's Serbs face a dilemma: on one side lies ostracism within their community and loss of Belgrade's material support, and on the other side there is the fear of living as a minority in a hostile environment. As reported reftel, this conundrum is even more acute for Serbs living in enclaves south of the Ibar River. The best tool we have to change this calculus is continued outreach to Serb communities and continued support for a decentralization plan that allows Serbs to retain meaningful authority over their daily affairs. Although Kosovo's economic prospects are uncertain, the focus of our development assistance should be to create conditions under which educated and ambitious Kosovars, whether Serb or Albanian, are not compelled for financial reasons to leave Kosovo. We will continue our engagement through all Mission elements to get this message out. As we do so, it is important that we broaden our contacts with all levels of the Serb community. End Comment.

¶10. (U) U.S. Office Pristina clears this cable for release in its entirety to U.N. Special Envoy for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari.

KAIDANOW